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ABSTRACT

Efforts to solve intergenerational literacy must focus on the family as a unit. However, schools traditionally have a poor track record in dealing with minority/disadvantaged students and involving their parents. Studies have demonstrated the importance of family/community influence on children as well as the cultural and linguistic insensitivity of school strategies. The structure of parent-school cooperation must be changed in order to use school resources to help parents become more literate and in turn help their children. The new Even Start federal program is one initiative toward this goal. Other successful programs such as Parents as Teachers (Missouri), the Family Matters program (Cornell University), and New York City's Project Prepare demonstrate the importance of giving parents a voice in school governance, thereby empowering them to break the illiteracy cycle. (Five "ideas to explore" are suggested and the names, addresses, and phone numbers of six resources are given.) (CML)

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MYTH #6:

SCHOOLS KNOW HOW TO WORK WITH PARENTS

The previous issue of The Literacy Beat *looked at intergenerational effects of illiteracy within the family. This issue examines the schools' role in helping stem intergenerational illiteracy.*

"That's not our job!"

As policymakers, researchers and other experts press upon educators the need for them to assume greater responsibility in areas previously reserved for families, a frequent response is that schools are not prepared nor are they appropriate to offer broader services to families. That's some other agency's job. Further, schools don't have the resources, educators contend.

Yet, times have changed, and school policies and viewpoints are under fire for seeming to lag behind the realities facing students from poor families. For a growing number of families, poverty, which goes hand-in-hand with illiteracy, no longer is cyclical. Instead of a short-term and in-and-out phenomenon, it is becoming permanent, concentrated in single-parent families and in urban ghettos.

"These developments have altered the social environment in which poor children grow up," says sociologist William J. Wilson of the University of Chicago. "They have changed the composition of inner-city schools, which increasingly are characterized by race and class isolation." But Wilson concedes that the concentration of the poor in central cities, "in the political and fiscal climate of the 1980s, has strained the finances of many big-city school systems."

Policies being implemented or argued about to address intergenerational illiteracy and other problems of poor families fall into the two basic camps regarding literacy. One is empowerment, the other is skills for productivity. In most places, both are being proposed or tried at the same time.

Advocacy leaders in Chicago, for example, are pushing for radical changes in the governance of schools to give parents much greater control over the education of their children. A by-product of such involvement would be parents who place a greater value on literacy for themselves and their children, say the advocates. At the same time, community programs in Chicago address the skills needs of individuals. Typical of such efforts is the Parent-Child Literacy Learning Program for housing authority residents. Using public library, school and community resources, the program works with parents through literacy centers in elementary schools, combining oral tapes and Polaroid pictures to develop texts for the parents based on their everyday world.

Both of these approaches take the view that efforts to solve intergenerational illiteracy cannot focus on adults alone, or children alone, but, instead, must work with the family as a unit.

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Many schools may see their responsibility toward intergenerational literacy bounded by adult literacy programs. Schools often sponsor these, but the staffs usually are separate, and funding does not come out of the general education budget. Generally, researchers admit that evidence is not conclusive yet about the success of schools in dealing with family illiteracy, but some findings suggest caution:

- Educators frequently lack empathy for or strategies to help poor families
- Many teachers/administrators see limited value in parent involvement. Yet, programs that link parents and children together for learning can be effective, particularly if schools cooperate with other community resources

SCHOOLS VERSUS THE POOR

The poor track record of schools in dealing with children from minority/disadvantaged families probably would hinder efforts to work with their parents.

Yale University psychologist James Comer contends that because of the attitudes of educators and structures of schools, the sources of risk for children from poor families or those under other kinds of stress "are in the schools, as well as in societal and family conditions outside the school."

Family and community structures that used to guide behavior of children and youth have been weakened, he says, but teachers expect students to come to school having learned certain behaviors. The authoritarian organization of schools is "unable to create a supportive climate at the service delivery or school building level because this structure cannot adjust easily to groups or individuals with needs different from those of the majority," Comer says.

The disappearance of positive social structures around children also has been noted by sociologist James Coleman of the University of Chicago, who created the trendy phrase "social capital." This is the sum of the family/community investment in children that used to help provide norms of conduct in growing up. (Coleman argues that one of the reasons Catholic schools succeed with poor children better than public schools is because they are one of the few remaining examples of a "community" which is intergenerational, where "the social capital of an adult community is available to children and youth.")

Another research project, by Don Davies of the Institute for Responsive Education in Boston, studied the relationship between schools and poor families in three areas--Boston, Liverpool and several cities in Portugal. He found that traditional parent involvement activities "may be working against equity rather than for it because they benefit most those who are better educated already." Davies reported to an education writers' seminar last fall that:

o In all of the schools studied, there was little contact between the schools and hard-to-reach parents except when a child was in trouble.

o Social class barriers were clearly evident in the attitudes of both teachers and parents. Teachers "have standardized middleclass values," he said, and "children who deviate from the norm are held to different expectations." Teachers talk only about how low-income families are "different.... Cultural diversity is viewed as a disease to be cured."

o Only one-third of the teachers thought the lack of contact with parents was a problem.

o In all cities, 85-90% of the poor families accepted the assessment of educators that "they don't know much and have little to offer their children." They are unwilling to challenge the schools, Davies said. Further, educators blame parents for not being involved (too tired, apathetic); practices of the schools rarely were criticized.

Another research strand on school-family connections hones in on what it views as the cultural/linguistic insensitivity of school strategies. Schools create learning difficulties for minority children, according to this research, by not honoring the cultural and linguistic traditions of a child's family, causing stress between children and their families. This makes parents even more reluctant to become literate themselves or to help their children value literacy. This is not just a bilingual issue. It involves, for example, cultural traditions that honor cooperation rather than competitiveness, or oral literacy over written literacy. (Catherine Snow of Harvard University, Shirley Brice-Heath of Stanford University and James Cummins of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.)

SCHOOLS AND PARENT INVOLVEMENT

It would be hard to find school administrators or teachers who would say that working with parents is not important. That's not the problem.

For families with inadequate levels of literacy, it is how schools structure parent involvement and how much educators recognize the link between parental literacy and a child's chances for learning in school that are crucial.

For at least the past two decades research consistently has documented the importance of parental interest in and encouragement of school-related activities. This emphasis is built into Head Start programs and in effective Chapter I (federal compensatory education) programs.

However, Joyce Epstein of the Center for Social Organization of Schools at The Johns Hopkins University, whose research focuses on parent involvement, found lackluster interest on the part of schools. Surveying the practices of 600 schools in all types of neighborhoods, she found that one-third of the parents had no conference with a teacher during the year, and two-thirds never talked with a teacher

A NEW FEDERAL INITIATIVE: EVEN START

Watch for a spurt in school district interest in parents who cannot read very well.

As part of the omnibus amendments to most major federal education programs, Congress approved in April the Even Start legisiation. It seeks to integrate early childhood education and adult education into single programs. Authorized at $50 million a year, the initial appropriation may be closer to $25 million--but it is a beginning. The programs must:

- o Identify and recruit eligible children, ages 1-7, and screen children and parents for participation, including referral to counseling, health and related services
- o Be designed to fit with schedules/needs of adults and children, including transportation and child care
- o Develop programs that address adult literacy and the training of parents to support the education growth of their children
- o Train staff to work with parents and children together
- o Provide home-based programs
- o Coordinate programs with other federally sponsored programs, such as adult literacy, job training and Head Start.

Every state will receive some funding under the formula, with the minimum set at $250,000. Three percent must be set aside by the Department of Education for migrant families. The federal share starts at 90% in the first year, decreases to 60% by the fourth year. Grants will be made directly to school districts by the Department of Education if appropriations are less than $50 million; if the full amount, state education agencies will select grant recipients.

by phone. More than 70% of the parents in the study were never involved in helping teachers or the school staff (58% of the mothers worked either full or parttime).

Teachers who worked closely with parents were just as likely to use home learning materials with parents who lacked high school diplomas as with those who were college graduates. However, other teachers said they did not involve less educated parents because those parents did not have the ability or willingness to help.

The traditional ways schools link with families--PTA meetings, open houses--appeal to parents already attuned to the goals of schooling, according to several experts. To reach poor, less literate families, schools need to be more aggressive, say Jeanne Chall and Catherine Snow of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. In a study of reading attainment by low-income children, they praised teachers who arranged frequent contact with parents--inviting them for private conferences, talking to them on the phone or visiting the homes.

Carrying parent involvement a step further--using school resources to help parents become more literate--is only beginning to show up in some school practices and policies. The new Even Start federal program may spur efforts (see box, p. 3).

Such collaboration, even when centered on the welfare of the children, carries some risks for both parents and schools, according to Robert Constable and Herbert Walberg, University of Illinois, Chicago. If the school sees its role as lending strength to vulnerable families, parents might feel they are losing their uniqueness. "The family would face choices of fighting the school or, more likely abdicating from its own responsibility in favor of the school," they wrote in a recent issue of *The Journal of Family and Culture*. Finding a way of collaborating which respects and preserves the functions of both families and schools will be difficult, they said.

Many adult literacy program directors have made a judgment call on the role of the schools, arranging for literacy programs to be offered in non-school settings. In Jackson County, Ky., for example, which has the highest level of adult illiteracy in the country, a successful adult literacy program deliberately stays away from schools. "Many of our students are so intimidated by schools that if they had to go to a school building to take their classes, they wouldn't go," says the program director, Judy Martin. Classes are held, instead, in community centers, libraries, court houses, fire departments, and the homes of tutors and students.

SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATIONS

Despite somewhat negative results from research about schools and parents, some schools/programs report success in their attempts to improve the literacy of parents.

In 1981 Missouri launched a pilot project of broad support for new parents, Parents as Teachers, which has become a national model. In the third year of statewide implementation, Parents as Teachers is serving 54,000 families this year, or 30% of families with babies. Through home visits, parent meetings and personal monitoring of family care, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education helps guide parenting of infants from birth through three years. Based on child development research, the emphasis is on stimulating healthy cognitive as well as social and physical growth.

The program is offered to all families, not just the poor, but one of the spin-offs, according to the director. Debbie Murphy, is that program workers can link parents with low literacy levels to literacy programs. The legislature also has approved extra funds for school districts to develop "creative strategies" for serving hard-to-reach parents.

Using funds from a public service award to establish a training center, the program has prepared personnel from 28 states and several foreign countries to replicate Parents as Teachers.

Cornell University, using research on family involvement by Mandrieff Cochran, has developed the Family Matters program, especially designed for hard-to-reach parents. Based on "empowerment" principles, the program reaches parents in homes and neighborhoods and concentrates on establishing parent networks. An example of the program in action is the Early Learning Center in Brighton, Mass., for children ages 3-6 and their parents.

The Board of Education's Project Prepare in New York City, aimed at mothers who read only at a fifth-grade level, provides full-time education programs at adult learning centers, supplemented with support for child care and transportation. (New York now requires all welfare recipients, including mothers with children over six years old, to participate in education and/or job training programs. An upcoming issue of the *Literacy Beat* will cover the pros and cons of mandated education programs for welfare recipients.)

Henry Levin of Stanford University maintains that disadvantaged children need "accelerated" schooling, not remedial training. In pilot schools in the Bay Area and in Missouri, he is trying out his ideas of clear goals for students, parents and staff; enriched curriculum; proven instructional strategies, such as cooperative learning and peer tutoring; and use of community resources.

An important aspect of the Accelerated Schools is parental participation. Not only do parents agree to certain goals, but they also are given training that enables them to work with their children, including literacy programs.

In a more limited and specific program, Reading Recovery, an Ohio-based project to prevent reading problems from developing in Chapter I first-graders, provides intensive tutoring everyday to children most in need. Parents are invited to observe the tutoring, then trained to help their children at home.

The Yale Child Study Center School Development Program, created by James Comer for the New Haven, Co[illegible]chools, has viewed child development as a family phenomenon since it began 20 years ago. Mental health support personnel and parent groups join teachers, retrained to deal with socially underdeveloped low income children, to improve the academic achievement of the children. Parents are given a voice in the governance through a building-level management group.

TWO BIRDS, ONE STONE

How schools can become more fully involved with families will be a major program emphasis at the annual meeting of the Education Commission of the States in Baltimore, Md., Aug. 11-13. ECS Chairman John Ashcroft, governor of Missouri, will release a report, "Drawing in the Family," and several panel discussions will deal with school/family connections.

At the same meeting, reporters can get a good grounding on another literacy issue--math skills. This will be a hot topic in the coming school year, with several reports on the way. **The Education Writers Association** is sponsoring a one-day seminar, integrated with the ECS program, on Aug. 11. The focus will be on changing math skills for the workplace. Reporters will have an opportunity to discuss math literacy issues with employers, researchers, and directors of major math improvement projects. Call the EWA offices for more information (202-429-9680).

IDEAS TO EXPLORE

o Try to determine the extent of intergenerational illiteracy in the schools. Some schools collect information about the education level of parents--an inadequate measure of literacy but about the best that might be available. If this information is not available, conduct your own surveys, focusing perhaps on children with reading problems.

o Why are the parents not literate? Dropouts? Dyslexia? Language barriers? Graduated without learning basic skills? How much does their literacy level influence their employability and income?

o What are the policies/practices of the schools toward parent involvement? Get behind the rhetoric. How frequently and for what reasons do teachers contact parents? What percentage of parents never have any contact with the schools? Why?

o Are there collaborative efforts between the schools and other community agencies to improve the literacy of families? What support systems would encourage parents to enroll in literacy programs, e.g. child care, transportation?

o What is the attitude of less literate parents toward literacy programs offered by the schools?

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